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Viewing cable 08BEIRUT661, LEBANON: ARMY COMMANDER SAYS HE WILL PROTECT THE

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08BEIRUT661	2008-05-12 16:20	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	Embassy Beirut

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11352>
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000661

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ARMY COMMANDER SAYS HE WILL PROTECT THE GOVERNMENT

REF: IIR 6 8578 0249 08

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Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C/NF) In two meetings on Sunday, May 11, Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Sleiman explained that he had not meant to embarrass the Prime Minister with his comments on GOL cabinet decisions, that reports of massive army resignations were not true, and that the Army would "defend until the death" Lebanese institutions. Sleiman also gave lengthy explanations of his view of the ongoing crisis and how to get out of the current impasse using dialogue as the primary methodology. Sleiman characterized Hizballah's activities as "militia" activities and said their current actions had nothing to do with "resistance." Sleiman reiterated previous claims that he does not have enough troops and that he cannot pull troops off the camp at Ain Al Hilweh for fear of terrorists leaking out into the community and causing even greater problems. End Summary.

2. (C/NF) Charge, DATT, and PolOff met with LAF Commander Michel Sleiman on two separate occasions at his office in Yarze on May 11, once in the morning, and one at night. Sleiman was more relaxed than one would have expected given the amount of recent fighting between Hizballah and the Druze, as well as the amount of political pressure he is receiving from the March 14 leaders.

ARMY OFFICERS HUMILIATED BY CURRENT EVENTS;
TENDER RESIGNATION

3. (C/NF) Sleiman told Charge that the reports of massive resignations in the Army were not true. Instead, the officers, some of them with tears in their eyes were coming to him tendering their resignations. The senior Sunni Muslim intelligence officer in the LAF, Colonel Ghassan Bala'a, who is also very close to Prime Minister Siniora, was one of the first to tender his resignation. The senior Sunni Commander in the LAF, Northern Area Commander Brigadier General Abdul Hameed Darweish, has also tendered his resignation. Sleiman met with both officers and asked them not to resign.

4. (C/NF) According to Sleiman, he has called upon their patriotism and commitment to the Army to prevent acceptance of the resignation letters. Sleiman acknowledged that the Sunni and Druze officers, and their confessional communities, have been humiliated by recent events. Sleiman recalled to these officers that he had been humiliated in 1982 when he was a Captain in the city of Dammour and the Christians were rousted by the Druze. Although he was humiliated, he did not leave the Army and that they should not leave now. Even with this strong call to not submit their resignations from the Army Commander, both men subsequently tendered resignations to the Army personnel offices. Sleiman told us he would not accept the resignations. Concerning the Druze Chief of Staff of the Army, Major General Shawki Al-Masri, Sleiman dodged our question saying, "I did not ask him about his resignation." Sleiman told us that Druze Leader Walid Jumblatt had phoned to say he had given instructions to Masri that he should stay with the Army. According to officers

inside Masri's office, he has submitted his resignation as well. It is unclear if these are bluffing tactics to pressure Sleiman, or if the officers intend to leave the Army. As of the morning of May 12, these officers are still at work and have not left the Army.

URBAN TERRAIN IS DIFFICULT FOR FIGHTING;
HIZBALLAH USED A CANCER ATTACK IN BEIRUT

15. (C/NF) Sleiman spent an extended period of time, to include making sketches of troop positions, to explain why things had been so difficult in Beirut. Sleiman told Charge that the confessionally mixed nature of the neighborhoods in

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West Beirut made it impossible to put troops in between all of the factions. At the same time, Sleiman assessed that the Shia had been planning for this type of event for a long time and had many more weapons and ammunition than the Sunnis. Sleiman explained the "cancer attack" tactics of Hizballah. When fighting would start in a mixed neighborhood, Hizballah would infiltrate into the Shia controlled buildings, establish their forward headquarters, and then expand outwardly from building to building, much like a spreading cancer. In Sleiman's view, the only military way he could have dealt with this would be to evacuate the civilians and attack the remaining fighters, "like we did in Nahr Al Bared where we destroyed everything." It was noteworthy that Sleiman, ever cognizant of the political sensitivities of name branding, called all of Hizballah's activities "militia activity." When pressed on this, Sleiman said he knew exactly what he was saying. "This is not resistance. This is militia activity," said Sleiman. (Note: This is the first time we have ever heard Sleiman refer to Hizballah activity as militia activity. End note.)

16. (C/NF) Given these types of tactics, Sleiman said that he needed many more men in Beirut, possibly as many as 10,000 to 15,000 more troops. Sleiman said his force was under great stress as they could not abandon any of their other missions to reinforce Beirut. Sleiman was especially concerned about Ain Al Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp and leakage of terrorists out of the Palestinian Camps. When asked about the role of the Internal Security Forces (ISF), Sleiman said, "the ISF has done nothing."

I ADVISED PM SINIORA NOT TO TAKE
DECISIONS AGAINST HIZBALLAH

17. (C/NF) Sleiman told Charge that the recent Cabinet decisions about Hizballah's communications network and the removal of the airport security chief, BG Wafiq Choucair were precipitous. Sleiman surmised that it was Druze leader MP Walid Jumblatt and Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh who pressured Siniora into these decisions to embarrass Hizballah. Sleiman told us, "I don't think their decision was wrong, but they could have chosen a better time given the planned labor strikes and ongoing political problems." When the Cabinet took the decision against Hizballah without any Shia on the Cabinet, they saw this as a direct threat against them and reacted. Sleiman thinks that there were other, less obtrusive, measures that could have been taken to address March 14 concerns without plunging the country into crisis.

BUT I DID NOT MEAN TO EMBARRASS HIM
WITH MY LETTER TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

18. (C/NF) After PM Siniora's speech on May 10 that called on the Army to examine these two issues, Gen. Sleiman issued a press release offering to accept responsibility for these items (reftel). Thirty minutes after offering to examine these two issues, Sleiman sent a "report" to the PM saying

that his initial investigation was complete and he suggested rescinding the two Cabinet decisions. Siniora told us he found this letter to be highly embarrassing and insulting simultaneously. Charge queried Sleiman on the timing and the apparent rump decision making process that resulted in the letter. Sleiman said, "I did not mean to embarrass him. This was not my intent. I thought I could give him cover to get out of this political problem."

¶9. (C/NF) Sleiman then told us that he had prepared the report ("compte rendu" was the exact term he used), not a "letter" as has been reported in the press, three days prior, on March 6, at his weekly Military Council Meeting. At this meeting, Sleiman put this decision to his Military Council, which has independent decision making authority as a check on the Army Commander's authority. The council, comprised of Druze, Sunni, Shia and Christian officers, said that the decisions were taken without using accepted investigatory methodologies. Additionally, they found that the Airport

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Security Chief, BG Wafiq Choucair, was, at most, guilty of failing to make a report to higher, an offense that merited much less than removal from his post. When the vote was taken, the Military Council returned a vote of 3 to 1 for recommendation to annul the two Cabinet decisions pending further investigation by the Army. The one dissenting voice was Sunni Major General Sa'ad Eid, PM Siniora's military advisor. After the decision was taken, Eid told Sleiman that he agreed with the Council, but that he had no choice but to oppose the decision. Sleiman said he understood this position, as did all of the other officers on the Military Council.

THE ONLY WAY OUT OF THIS IS DIALOGUE
HIZBALLAH KNOWS THEY CANNOT HAVE EVERYTHING

¶10. (C/NF) Sleiman told Charge that there was no way out of the current impasse without dialogue. Sleiman does not think that Hizballah knows what they want after their gains during the past three days. At the same time, Sleiman is sure Hizballah knows it cannot have "everything." Even so, Sleiman anticipates that Hizballah will remain persistent as it is unsure of what is happening regionally. Sleiman said that Hizballah is concerned about a deal between Syria and Israel, after which the "the head of Hizballah will be the price."

¶11. (C/NF) "I tell them they have made a big mistake," said Sleiman. Sleiman thinks that Hizballah's "militia" activities over the past three days may have opened a new front in the Sunni-Shia conflict in the wider Middle East. Sleiman said he had told a Hizballah MP recently, "in your conduct, you have created terrorists in the Sunnites; not one, but many Zawahiris will be in the streets against you now." According to Sleiman, this is the message he sent to Hassan Nasrallah as a warning to be heeded.

WE WILL DEFEND THE GOVERNMENT
UNTIL THE DEATH, AND OVER OUR DEAD BODIES

¶12. (C/NF) Charge told Sleiman that the Embassy had spoken with an LAF officer who had complained that "the politicians put us into this mess; it is not the Army's job to protect them." Charge told Sleiman that this was not acceptable and that the Grand Serail (where the PM and many Cabinet members live and work) and the homes of political leaders needed to be protected, especially in view of rumors that these locations would be attacked in the course of the night. During the evening meeting with Sleiman, USDP Eric Edelman called to confer with Charge and subsequently spoke with Gen. Sleiman. After delivering a strongly worded statement to Sleiman about USG expectations concerning the protection of state institutions and the protection of political leaders,

Sleiman called his commanders. In front of Charge, Sleiman reinforced his previous orders to the Ranger Regiment Commander, Colonel Saleh Kais, a Shia. Specifically, Sleiman said, "You will defend until the death, the Grand Serail (PM Siniora's seat of government), Qoraetem (MP Saad Hariri's Residence) and Clemenceau (Druze Leader Walid Jumblatt's residence). You are to sacrifice yourselves to protect these places. The enemy should have to walk across your dead bodies to enter these places. I repeat, open fire if you are attacked."

COMMENT

¶13. (C/NF) We cannot help but wonder if there is something afoot with regards to a deal. Sleiman, normally a very fidgety interlocutor during times of crisis, seemed quite at ease. He was in his complete uniform, to include polished boots -- vice his normal tennis shoes when there is a crisis.

While we have no information that would corroborate any such deal making, we remain skeptical at Sleiman's all-too-cool posture given that there is fighting in the streets.

SISON